

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Myron Kelley, #300218,)	C/A No. 3:08-2801-HMH-JRM
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	
vs.)	
)	
J. Marcus Whitlark;)	Report and Recommendation
Paul C. Ballou, all in,)	
)	
Defendants.)	

The Plaintiff, Myron Kelley (Plaintiff), proceeding *pro se*, brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983.¹ Plaintiff is an inmate at Perry Correctional Institution, a facility of the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC), and files this action *in forma pauperis* under 28 U.S.C. § 1915. The complaint names two private attorneys as Defendants. The complaint should be dismissed for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.

Pro Se and In Forma Pauperis Review

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of the *pro se* complaint pursuant to the procedural provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915; 28 U.S.C. § 1915A; and the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996). This review has been conducted in light of the following precedents: *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324-25 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972); *Nasim v. Warden, Md. House of Corr.*, 64 F.3d 951 (4th Cir. 1995) (*en banc*); *Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d 70 (4th Cir. 1983).

¹ Pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. §636(b)(1)(B), and Local Rule 73.02(B)(2)(d), D.S.C., the undersigned is authorized to review such complaints for relief and submit findings and recommendations to the District Court.

The complaint herein has been filed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915, which permits an indigent litigant to commence an action in federal court without prepaying the administrative costs of proceeding with the lawsuit. To protect against possible abuses of this privilege, the statute allows a district court to dismiss the case upon a finding that the action “fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted” or is “frivolous or malicious.” § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i), (ii). A finding of frivolity can be made where the complaint “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. at 31. Hence, under § 1915(e)(2)(B), a claim based on a meritless legal theory may be dismissed *sua sponte*. *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989); *Allison v. Kyle*, 66 F.3d 71 (5th Cir. 1995).

This Court is required to liberally construe *pro se* documents, *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976), holding them to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys, *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 9 (1980) (*per curiam*). Even under this less stringent standard, however, the *pro se* complaint is subject to summary dismissal. The mandated liberal construction afforded to *pro se* pleadings means that if the court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which the plaintiff could prevail, it should do so, but a district court may not rewrite a petition to include claims that were never presented, *Barnett v. Hargett*, 174 F.3d 1128, 1133 (10th Cir. 1999), construct the plaintiff's legal arguments for him, *Small v. Endicott*, 998 F.2d 411, 417-18 (7th Cir. 1993), or “conjure up questions never squarely presented” to the court, *Beaudett v. City of Hampton*, 775 F.2d 1274, 1278 (4th Cir. 1985). The requirement of liberal construction does not mean that the court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts which set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Dep't of Soc. Servs.*, 901 F.2d 387, (4th Cir. 1990).

Background

Plaintiff states that Defendants Whitlark and Ballou are attorneys in a small law firm. Plaintiff claims that Defendant Whitlark, who apparently represented Plaintiff at some point, had possession of Plaintiff's original case file. Defendant Whitlark allegedly refused to provide Plaintiff or Plaintiff's

attorney, in a post-conviction relief action, with the original case file upon request. Plaintiff states Defendant Whitlark “intentionally kept Plaintiff’s case file so that Plaintiff could not use the case file to prove ineffective assistance of counsel in his PCR.” Plaintiff claims that Defendant Whitlark’s actions violated Plaintiff’s due process rights and prejudiced Plaintiff’s PCR action. Plaintiff indicates that he has filed a complaint with the Office of Disciplinary Counsel regarding Defendant Whitlark. Plaintiff states Defendant Ballou is named as a Defendant for having knowledge of his law partner’s actions, but failing to report the alleged misconduct. Plaintiff seeks monetary damages in the instant action.

Discussion

In order to state a cause of action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege that: (1) the defendants deprived him of a federal right, and (2) did so under color of state law. *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980). However, an attorney, whether retained, court-appointed, or a public defender, does not act under color of state law when performing traditional functions as counsel. *See Polk County v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 317-324 & nn. 8-16 (1981) (public defender); *Hall v. Quillen*, 631 F.2d 1154, 1155-1156 & nn. 2-3 (4th Cir. 1980) (court-appointed attorney); *Deas v. Potts*, 547 F.2d 800 (4th Cir. 1976) (private attorney). As the Defendants are private attorneys who are not amenable to suit under § 1983, the action is subject to summary dismissal.

In addition, negligence and legal malpractice are not actionable under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *See Daniels v. Williams*, 474 U.S. 327, 328-336 & n. 3 (1986); *Davidson v. Cannon*, 474 U.S. 344, 345-348 (1986); *Ruefly v. Landon*, 825 F.2d 792, 793-794 (4th Cir. 1987); *Pink v. Lester*, 52 F.3d 73 (4th Cir. 1995) (applying *Daniels v. Williams* and *Ruefly v. Landon*: “The district court properly held that *Daniels* bars an action under § 1983 for negligent conduct[.]”). Secondly, 42 U.S.C. § 1983 does not impose liability for violations of duties of care arising under state law. *DeShaney v. Winnebago County Dep’t*

of Soc. Servs., 489 U.S. 189, 200-03 (1989). Thus, to the extent Plaintiff attempts to assert a legal malpractice claim, such an action is not cognizable under § 1983.

Finally, to the extent Plaintiff may be attempting to bring a legal malpractice claim based upon this Court's diversity jurisdiction, his action must also fail. While negligence and legal malpractice are causes of action under South Carolina law, *See, e.g., Mitchell v. Holler*, 311 S.C. 406, 429 S.E.2d 793 (1993), a civil action for negligence and legal malpractice would be cognizable in this Court *only* if the diversity statutes' requirements were met. *See Cianbro Corp. v. Jeffcoat & Martin*, 804 F. Supp. 784, 788-91 (D.S.C. 1992). The diversity statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1332(a), requires complete diversity of parties and an amount in controversy in excess of seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000.00). Complete diversity of parties in a case means that no party on one side may be a citizen of the same state as any party on the other side. *Owen Equip. & Erection Co. v. Kroger*, 437 U.S. 365, 372-74 & nn. 13-16 (1978). In the present case, diversity jurisdiction is lacking because Plaintiff and both Defendants are residents of South Carolina. Therefore, Plaintiff's claim is subject to summary dismissal.

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the District Court dismiss the complaint in the above-captioned case *without prejudice* and without issuance of service of process. *See Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. at 31; *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. at 324-25; *Todd v. Baskerville* 712 F.2d at 74. Plaintiff's attention is directed to the important notice on the next page.

September 3, 2008
Columbia, South Carolina

s/Joseph R. McCrorey
United States Magistrate Judge

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Court Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. In the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must “only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005).

Specific written objections must be filed within ten (10) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b). The time calculation of this ten-day period excludes weekends and holidays and provides for an additional three (3) days for filing by mail. Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a) & (e). Filing by mail pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

Larry W. Propes, Clerk
United States District Court
901 Richland Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985).